

Teaching Vocabulary to English Teacher Trainees

By Leslie Cohen

In non-English speaking countries, the vast majority of college students preparing to become English teachers are nonnative speakers of the language. In order for them to become proficient readers and writers, they need to enrich their vocabulary in addition to building their rhetorical skills. The following procedure was designed to help them learn additional vocabulary within the framework of the oral skills and writing courses they are required to take. The system has proved to be both efficient and successful efficient in that it demands a minimal amount of class time, and successful in that the students can remember and use the new vocabulary with ease.

Step One: Assessing the Needs of a Specific Class

This can be done by the teacher, the students, or as a collaborative effort by both parties. The first step is to compile a vocabulary list with the same number of words as students in a given class. The words should be taken from both literary sources and methodology readings that the students will have to read in the upcoming academic year. Whenever possible, the words should be given in the context in which they appear (either in a phrase or a sentence.)

The criteria for accepting a word are:

- its usefulness in nonprofessional as well as professional contexts
- its frequency of usage in literature and spoken language

Step Two: Checking the List with Native Speaker Students (optional)

Where possible (and if desired), the list may be checked with students who are native speakers of English, in order to identify and define the words on the list that they know. Their reactions should indicate the suitability of the vocabulary for students who are non-native speakers.

Step Three: Preparing a Transparency

The list should be written on a transparency for projection onto a screen. The students are then asked to identify each word they know. Hopefully, they should recognize some of the words or be able to guess their meanings.

Step Four: Assigning Responsibility for Each Word

Next, each student is assigned a word to look up and present to the rest of the class. To guide their efforts, a "word profile" is suggested. Some of the items are mandatory (indicated by stars) while others are optional.

Word Profile:

- Definition*
- Part of speech*
- Pronunciation*
- Synonyms and/or antonyms
- "Scale" (more than, equal to, less than)
- "Chunking" (i.e. putting the word in a short, meaningful phrase)
- Personal associations
- A defining sentence*
- Derivatives (i.e. different forms of the word)
- Connotation (This is often a problem for foreign learners to do by themselves. I view the role of the teacher as providing this kind of cultural information.)

Step Five: Vocabulary Reports

In each class session, one student is responsible for presenting a vocabulary item. The reports take about five minutes, and are usually given at the beginning of the lesson. Students are encouraged to recall contexts in which they have encountered the word.

Step Six: Review and Self-checking

Every few weeks, the students review the vocabulary items that have been presented in class. Several procedures can be used for reviewing, depending on the aspect of vocabulary that the teacher wants to emphasize.

1. Provide a worksheet with sentences in which one vocabulary item is missing. The students go over their vocabulary lists and fill in the missing word. This is a simple word recognition activity.
2. Provide a worksheet with partial sentences which need to be completed. In each partial sentence, one of the vocabulary items is mentioned. The task of the students is to complete the sentence in any way that is meaningful. This reviews the vocabulary and provides more writing practice.
3. If there is a strong literature component in the students' program, it is advisable to ask students to write down the vocabulary items that they have found citing the literary context for some of these words.

It takes about fifteen minutes for the reviewing and checking activity. No grading is involved. Sharing ideas and opinions is encouraged.

Conclusion

The procedure described above is efficient and requires very little time. Each student learns all the new vocabulary items, but has to look up only one word. Each student has an opportunity to give an oral presentation, which strengthens their oral skills and reinforces methodology that they will use as teachers.

This approach heightens the student teachers' level of awareness of vocabulary, and they begin to notice these words in their readings. They begin to read with greater understanding, and to use the words in their academic papers the ultimate purpose for which the activity was designed.

The following is a list of ten vocabulary items that I have used in several classes. It may be of interest to other teachers.

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| redundant | tenacious |
| vacillate | instigate |
| eclectic | flourish |
| detrimental | credibility |
| recurrent | stagnant |

Leslie Cohen is a English teacher trainer at the Arab Teachers Training Seminary in Haifa. She also teaches English at Oranim College of Education.